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Guest Editors: B. DESSEIN & C. STURTEWAGEN

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Conclusions

by

Bart DESSEIN*

Concluding an international conference that has dealt with issues of 'wisdom', 'politics', and their relation in a geographically-expanded area stretching from the Ottoman empire to the island state of Japan and contemporary Thailand in Southeast Asia is not an easy task. The difficulty of it is, of course, related to the cultural diversity and the peculiar historical backgrounds and traditions which have shaped 'wisdom' and 'politics' in the individual countries and nation-states that form this geographical expanse, but it is further complicated by our approach to these issues, and by the way our approach is shaped by our own historical background and tradition.

I will illustrate this with an example taken from research conducted at the Ghent Centre for Buddhist Studies of Ghent University on the revival of Buddhism and the (re)shaping of a 'Buddhist identity' in contemporary China. The beginnings of academic research on Buddhism in Europe date back to the nineteenth century. It has been shown that nineteenth century European Buddhological research was fundamentally driven by a 'Christian' attitude: in the same way as philological research on the holy texts of Christianity had traditionally endeavoured to reconstruct the history of the Christian faith back to the time of Jesus, nineteenth century Buddhological research aimed at reconstructing the history of Buddhism back to the figure of the historical Buddha. This was done through philological analysis of Buddhist texts in Pāli and Sanskrit. Neglecting all those elements that did not fit into the Christian-shaped framework and premises of religious development, the endeavour to reconstruct 'original Buddhism' in fact resulted in the 'creation' of a Buddhist historiography which was mirrored in the history of Christian faith [1]**. This 'Buddhist construct', in turn, informed Buddhist identity in Asia. The latter phenomenon became particularly prominent when, as one aspect of the

* Member of the Academy; Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, Ghent University, Blandijnberg 2, B-9000 Ghent (Belgium).

** Numbers in brackets [] refer to the notes and references, p. 114.

European colonial enterprise, the Christians inspired the concept according to which a 'religion' should be encroached on the Asian traditional concept of 'popular belief' and Asian societies reclassified and reorganized their traditional 'religions' in a reaction to adjust themselves to European 'modernization' [2]. The creation of a 'religious identity' is, however, not only the product of a negotiation with other traditions, but also of a negotiation with one's own past. As stated by Anthony Kemp, "A sense of time is fundamental to human thought to the extent that the past must be invoked in order to establish any present ideology, even one that involves a discounting of the past. All ideologies are fundamentally descriptions not of a present state, but of a past history" [3]. This implies that also Buddhist modernity will be influenced by the particular history of Buddhism in a given region and therefore by the peculiar mutual influence social and political structures and Buddhism may have had on each other. History and modern life — the contemporary *condition humaine* — in China are indeed different from history and modern life in India, Japan, or Thailand. This diversity is corroborated in interviews conducted with Buddhist nuns in contemporary China which revealed that, although nuns may generally claim that traditional rules for monastic conduct should be adapted to modern Chinese usage, they occasionally also refer to (an undefined) 'tradition' to justify monastic conduct. 'Tradition' therefore appears to remain an important facet of contemporary 'identity building' [4].

What the above example shows is that 'tradition' is an important identity marker both in the West and in the East, and that this 'tradition' is *not* an 'absolute value'. This is, in my opinion, a first major conclusion that can be drawn from today's conference on traditional wisdom and political expression. In its characteristic of not being 'absolute', tradition opens up the way to the field of the myth and the divine. The importance of this was briefly summarized by Martin Kern as follows: "Through remembrance, history turns into myth", whereby "it does not become unreal but, on the contrary, and only then, reality in the sense of a continual normative and formative force" [5].

As a normative and formative force, tradition provides the present with a sense and the present only attains a sense because it is founded in an — imagined or unimagined — past. This is a second conclusion that can be drawn from today's conference. For the concrete Chinese case, this phenomenon has been studied by Wolfgang Bauer, among others. For China, a country in which inherited wisdom and politics have always been intricately connected (and contemporary China is no exception to this), W. Bauer claimed, "[W]as [...] die chinesische Philosophie darüber hinaus mit der Vergangenheit verband, war der rückwärts gewandte Blick, der sie von Anbeginn charakterisierte. Die

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

- [1] See C. Maes, *Dialogues with(in) the Pāli Vinaya. A Research into the Dynamics and Dialectics of the Pāli Vinaya's Ascetic Others, with a Special Focus on the Jain Other* (unpublished PhD dissertation, Ghent University, 2015), pp. 11-36.
- [2] For the impact of the Christian concept of 'religion' on Asian indigenous traditions, see V. Goossaert & D. A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago & London, The University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 50. For the concept of 'popular belief', see M. Gaenssbauer, *Popular Belief in Contemporary China. A Discourse Analysis* (Bochum/Freiburg, Project Verlag Edition Cathay, 69, 2015), p. 9.
- [3] A. Kemp, *The Estrangement of the Past: A Study in the Origins of Modern Historical Consciousness* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 106.
- [4] T. Chiu, *Contemporary Buddhist Nunneries in Taiwan and Mainland China: A Study of Vinaya Practices* (unpublished PhD dissertation, Ghent University, 2016).
- [5] M. Kern, "Announcements from the mountains: The stele inscriptions of the Qin First Emperor", in F. H. Mutschler & A. Mittag (Eds.), *Conceiving the Empire. China and Rome Compared*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, [2008] 2009, p. 226.
- [6] W. Bauer, *Geschichte der Chinesischen Philosophie* (München, Verlag C. H. Beck, 2006), p. 37.
- [7] The original poem, entitled "Jonkingly while washing my son", was translated into Dutch by W. L. Idema, *Spiegel van de klassieke Chinese poëzie van het Boek der Oden tot de Qing-dynastie* (Amsterdam, Meulenhoff, 1991), p. 503: "De mensen hopen allen dat hun zonen schrandere zijn. / Maar ik heb door mijn schrandereheid mijn leven wel verknoeid. / Mijn wens is daarom dat de jongen simpel zij en dom. / Zodat hij zonder rampspoed het zal brengen tot minister! //¹⁷".